

68 THE SPECIALS

The Specials
Chrysalis



THE SPECIALS FOUND A HAPPY MEDIUM between the aggression of punk and the more danceable, upbeat rhythms of ska. Sporting porkpie hats and two-tone suits, the racially mixed seven-member band from Coventry, in Britain, spearheaded a ska renaissance. The Specials' debut album, produced by Elvis Costello, also launched the briefly successful 2-Tone Record label.

The Specials opens with a cover of Robert "Dandy" Thompson's ska anthem "A Message to You Rudy," then dives into more manic numbers, like a gritty version of Rufus Thomas's "Do the Dog" and the band's own "Concrete Jungle."

In his first outing as a producer, Costello captured the spirit of the Specials' frenetic live shows by re-creating a club environment in the studio. "It was a terrific atmosphere," says vocalist Neville Staples of the sessions at London's PW studios. "We just went in and played our show. It was all live in the studio."

In fact, for the song "Nite Club," the band even brought in an audience. "We had roadies, Chrissie Hynde and a few other friends," says Staples. "It was a laugh, because we had a little drink to get

white unit," says Staples. "At the time there was a lot of racism happening. So we just thought, 'Well, we went to school with black and white guys. Instead of fighting and calling people names, let's work together.' So we combined black music with punk. We just mixed the two cultures."

Producers: *Elvis Costello and the Specials*. Released: *December 1979*. Highest chart position: *Number Eighty-four*.

69 RADIO

L.L. Cool J
Def Jam/Columbia



L.L. COOL J (BORN JAMES TODD SMITH) was seventeen years old when he recorded this early rap masterpiece. Rhymes such as "They hear me, they fear me/My funky poetry/I'm improving the conditions of the rap industry" proved prophetic — *Radio* went platinum, ushering in rap's blockbuster era and heralding the arrival of a superb rapper.

The liner notes say, "Reduced by Rick Rubin," and simplicity was the key to *Radio*. "We were going to bring it down, break it down, reduce it to its most minimal form — like *real low*," says L.L.

But its minimalism wasn't what made *Radio* a rap landmark. Before 1984, most rappers had simply recited continuous rhymes over four minutes of groove. Rubin arranged raps like pop songs, with verses, choruses and bridges. So that L.L.'s rhymes could fit into this new format, Rubin says, "I would say, 'You've got twelve lines, and you've got to do it in eight.' And L.L. would rewrite it so it worked in eight. It was just making rap more like songs."

L.L. Cool J stands for "Ladies Love Cool James"; he became one of rap's first heartthrobs, partly because of his dimpled good looks and macho swagger, but also because *Radio* includes two of the earliest rap ballads, the cuddly "I Want You" and "I Can Give You More."

One of *Radio*'s most powerful tracks is "Rock the Bells." Oddly enough, the track has no bells on it. L.L. was set to record the track using a cowbell break from a song called "Mardi Gras," until Run-D.M.C. used the identical beat on its "Pe-

ter Piper." As L.L. puts it, "I got housed." Rubin suggested using a percussion break from the go-go great Trouble Funk instead, and L.L. turned in a ferocious performance; the moment when he yells, "Rock the bells!" and the go-go beat kicks in is one of the most dramatic in rap.

The album's opener, "I Can't Live Without My Radio," became a B-boy anthem. Now that L.L. has reached the advanced age of twenty-two, he says he is still unable to live without his radio. "But now it's in my car — know what I mean?"

Producer: *Rick Rubin*. Released: *November 1985*. Highest chart position: *Number Forty-six*.

70 TRAVELING WILBURYS

VOLUME I
The Traveling Wilburys
Wilbury/Warner Bros.



"THIS IS THE BEST RECORD OF ITS KIND ever made," wrote David Wild in *ROLLING STONE*'s review of the Traveling Wilburys' *Volume One*. "Then again," he added, "it's also the *only* record of its kind ever made."

The Traveling Wilburys' album was one of those happy accidents that was almost waiting to happen. Starting with a throwaway song quickly recorded by George Harrison, Bob Dylan, Tom Petty, Roy Orbison and Jeff Lynne for the B side of a Harrison single, the project soon took on a life of its own. After completing the track and deciding it was too good to waste on a flip side, the veteran rockers cooked up a full-length album that not only included some of each member's strongest material in years but also became one of the decade's genuinely unique musical achievements.

From the catchy folk-pop hooks of the first number, "Handle With Care," to the breezy country-rock finale, "End of the Line," the album's chiefly acoustic tunes all have the sound of instant classics. But the real kicker was the presentation. Rather than releasing the album under their own names, the five musicians hid behind a thin cloak of anonymity, attributing their work to a mythical supergroup and adopting hick personae as part of an elaborate charade that included a bogus

biography and a custom record label.

The tongue-in-cheek concept was a humorous way of placing the emphasis on the music instead of the big names. Besides offering a witty commentary that mocked the symbols of superstardom, the Wilbury sobriquet served as a sly, preemptive strike against those who might spoil the party and canonize the fun-fest as a Serious Rock Summit.

The five half-brothers of the Wilbury family were hokey but hip, and their individual strengths complemented one another perfectly. There was Orbison (Lefty Wilbury), whose haunting, dynamic vocals are enshrined on the operatic "Not Alone Any More," and who reclaimed his former glory only to pass away shortly after the album became a huge hit. Harrison (Nelson Wilbury) spearheaded the project following his fine solo album, *Cloud Nine*, proving that his comeback was no mere fluke. Dylan (Lucky Wilbury) emerged from a rut of several mediocre albums with his sneering "Congratulations," the jaunty "Dirty World" and a seeming lampoon of Bruce Springsteen, "Tweeter and the Monkey Man." Meanwhile, Petty (Charlie T. Jr.) acted out the role of eager kid brother, with his fine work on "End of the Line" and the woolly pickup tale "Last Night," presaging his top-selling solo album the following year. Rounding out the quintet was Lynne (Otis Wilbury), the former Electric Light Orchestra leader who handled most of the production chores and also sang the throbbing rockabilly bopper "Rattled."

Describing a typical day in the life of the Wilburys, Lynne remembers how the five musicians usually gathered at Dave Stewart's home studio in Los Angeles and banged out ideas until a complete song resulted from the jamming. "We would arrive about twelve or one o'clock and have some coffee," says Lynne. "Somebody would say, 'What about this?' and start on a riff. Then we'd all join in, and it'd turn into something. We'd finish around midnight and just sit for a bit while Roy would tell us fabulous stories about Sun Records or hanging out with Elvis. Then we'd come back the next day to work on another one. That's why the songs are so good and fresh — because they haven't been second-guessed and dissected and replaced. It's so tempting to add stuff to a song when you've got unlimited time."

While the Wilburys were intended as a lark, songs like "Heading for the Light," "Not Alone Any More" and "Handle With Care" offer idealistic, romantic messages from a fraternity of rock graybeards. "Well, it's alright, riding around in the breeze/Well, it's alright, if you live the life you please," says the opening lyric to "End of the Line." It is a comforting notion indeed, as the uptight, conformist Eighties draw to a close.

Producers: *Otis and Nelson Wilbury*. Released: *October 1988*. Highest chart position: *Number Three*.

THE TOP 100

the pub atmosphere going."

"We wanted it to be like the first Clash album," said bassist Horace Panter shortly after the album's U.S. release in 1980. "Not necessarily produced, just recorded. Costello was more of an observer, if you like. Suggesting things that we were too involved in to see ourselves."

In addition to its punk-meets-reggae sensibility, *The Specials* is charged with antiracist sentiment: "Just because you're a black boy/Just because you're a white/It doesn't mean you've got to hate him/Doesn't mean you got to fight," sings Terry Hall in the calypso-flavored "Doesn't Make It All Right."

"We were working as a black and